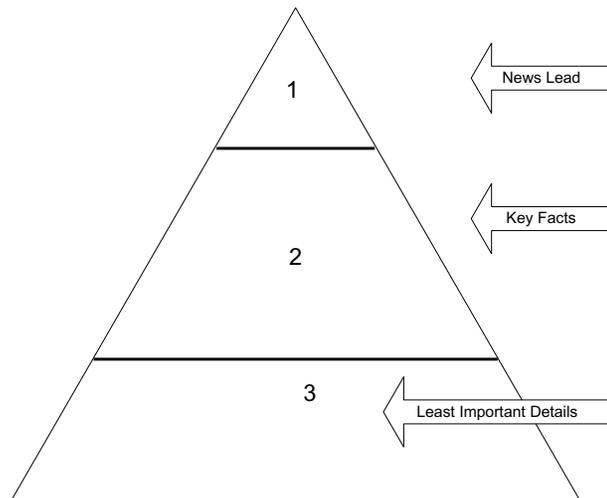


Put Your Conclusion or News Lead in the First Paragraph of the Article



BACKGROUND |

Start with the summary or conclusion

When you think, the conclusion comes last. But when you write for the Web, you need to move that conclusion—or summary of the news—up to the front of the article.

Guests wonder whether your article is worth reading.

You have to let readers know right away what's in it for them. (Amy Gahrn, in Silva, 1998)

By putting your main idea into the first line of the first paragraph, you let people figure out whether the rest of the article is relevant to them and whether the topic is what they were after.

Begin each product description with information that

Anticipate your conclusion.

—Abeledo, 1999

distinguishes that product from others and enables customers to recognize quickly which products do and don't meet their needs. (IBM, 1999)

Life is very nice, but it lacks form. The aim of art is to give life some shape.

—Jean Anouilh

Like the lead sentence in a news story, the short conclusion gives users the gist of the page. That will be enough for most guests.

It was more than three times as common for users to limit their reading to a brief, as opposed to reading a full article. (Nielsen, 2000b)

Putting your main point first lets people skip the evidence that led you to that conclusion, if they aren't interested. But if they care, they can stick around.

A Web site has only two to three seconds in which to grab and retain the user's attention. Therefore, the first page—and the first items that appear on that page—must make a positive first impression. (America Online, 2001)

Write the first sentence last

You may be used to building up to a conclusion through careful argument, so stating the idea right away seems bald. Here's the trick:

Form is not something added to substance as a mere protuberant adornment. The two are fused into a unity. ... They are the tokens of the thing's identity. They make it what it is.

—Benjamin Cardozo

Write the beginning last. (Bricklin, 1998)

Just write your draft the usual way, and when you finally figure out what you are saying, grab that paragraph or sentence and move it forward.

Before

In a recent study, we challenged our participants to set up a candle so it would light up the whole desk area, a task that demanded people find a way of attaching a candle to a screen behind the desk. We gave 15 participants some candles, tacks, matches, and boxes, without anything inside; we gave another 15 participants the same materials, but put the candles in one box, the tacks in another, and the matches in another. The first group, having never seen anything inside the boxes, felt free to put a candle inside a box, attaching the box to the screen by hot wax. The group who saw the boxes as containers for the supplies never realized they could use a box as a platform. They were stuck with the limiting idea that the boxes could act only as containers.

Thus, a person may get fixated, adopting the point of view so vividly presented by a demonstration or display, and never letting go. Our study proves that although a diagram, display, or demonstration may help someone understand a solution or function, that very success can limit the person's imagination when dealing with another problem.

195 words.

After

A diagram or demonstration may help someone understand a solution or function, but limits the person's imagination when dealing with another problem. The person may get fixated, adopting the point of view so vividly presented, never letting go.

In our study, we challenged our participants to set up a candle so it would light up the whole desk area, a task that demanded that people find a way of attaching a candle to a screen behind the desk.

- 1) We gave 15 participants some candles, tacks, matches, and boxes, without anything inside.
- 2) We gave another 15 participants the same materials, but put the candles in one box, the tacks in another, and the matches in another.

The first group, having never seen anything inside the boxes, felt free to put a candle inside a box, attaching the box to the screen by hot wax.

But the group who saw the boxes as containers for the supplies never realized they could use a box as a platform. They were stuck with the limiting idea that the boxes could act only as containers.

186 words.

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

Not necessary, but acceptable. Making your point right away ensures that your guests will be able to follow your article. But when entertaining, you're entitled to draw out the introduction quite a while. Put the news at the end of your intro.

TO LEARN

General ideas need a brief intro, but not a lot. Highlight them right away, and then expand on them.

TO ACT

Say what the goal or purpose is, right off, in the title and any introduction.

TO BE AWARE

Not so easy, and not so necessary. You can build up to your point if people have a general idea where you are going. Just don't take more than a paragraph or so to get there.

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

Always best, if you want to be understood. On the other hand, if you prefer to start off by venting, go ahead and make your point by repeating yourself a dozen times. (No one will be listening).

See: Abeleto (1999), America Online (2001), Bricklin (1998), Deese and Kaufman (1957), Frase (1969), Freebody and Anderson (1986), IBM (1999), Isakson and Spyridakis (1999), Levine (1997), Morke & Nielsen (1997), Nielsen (1997b, 1999f, 2000b), Silvia (1998), Spyridakis (2000).

For your review only.

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